

Forget the candles, values are on the line

By Janet Albrechtsen, *The Australian*, 29 March 2017

Last Thursday when Islamic terrorism struck Westminster, the birthplace of our own free parliamentary democracy, Tory MP Tobias Ellwood marched towards danger to try to save policeman Keith Palmer.

Ellwood's brother was killed in the 2002 Bali bombings. The policeman died, along with three other innocent people. Ellwood later said: "What a mad world."

Infuriatingly mad because there is a familiar pattern that plays out following each terrorist attack. First, politicians across the West come together to speak of solidarity, unity, horror. They tell us our democracies are strong, that terrorism will not defeat us. They talk about values and institutions that define us. Then there are the concomitant hashtags, nice memes and candlelit vigils.

But something bad is going on that requires more than a candle and talk of solidarity. The truth is that across the West, fewer and fewer people show support for our values. Our solidarity is more shallow and momentary than deep and enduring.

The strength of Western democracies is the daily exercise of free will of millions of people. The beauty of freedom allows you to think differently from each other, to cast your vote differently, to act differently. But the greater good arises from these acts of freedom only when there is support for core values: individual liberty, the rule of law, freedom of association, freedom of speech and so on.

As Theresa May said last week, "The location of this attack was no accident. The terrorist chose to strike at the heart of our capital city, where people of all nationalities, religions and cultures come together to celebrate the values of liberty, democracy and freedom of speech."

For all the declarations about the strength of our democracy, there is a growing disagreement about these core values. Not just the normal wrangle over the friction between "rights" that we deal with daily but a growing cacophony of deep dissent about the very worth of some rights.

The British Prime Minister mentioned freedom of speech, yet there is no longer broad agreement about its importance in a thriving democracy. In Australia, large sections of the media, the entire Labor Party, the Greens and crossbenchers refuse to acknowledge that section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act curbs free speech. A law that allows a claimant to rush off to a bureaucracy or go to court for hurt feelings is a law that chills free speech.

It's no coincidence that identity politics is in full swing at the same time that more people chose to be offended for the purpose of section 18C in order to shut down opinions they don't like.

It's no coincidence either that Bill Leak was hated both by Islamic State, which wanted to kill him, and sections of the left, which wanted him to stop provoking debate about issues outside their orthodox positions. That curious coalescence reveals there is no longer solidarity or even basic agreement about the value of freedom of speech in our democracy.

Indeed, the terrain for acceptable talk keeps shrinking in the West. Take the recent Coopers brouhaha when gay marriage activists rose up to object to a civil conversation between Tim Wilson, an advocate of same-sex marriage, and Andrew Hastie, a supporter of traditional

marriage. The bullies responded with clear intent to shut down a legitimate debate that stepped outside the boundaries of permissible talk.

Barely a week later, IBM managing partner Mark Allaby was targeted by same-sex marriage activists for his role in a Christian organisation. His private right to a different view about marriage in liberal democracy is unacceptable to sections of the left.

If we cannot have a civil, reasoned discussion about same-sex marriage, how can we hope to discuss the challenge of Islamic terrorism? In this diminishing domain of debate, each terrorist attack is followed by claims of Islamophobia and equally unhelpful exhortations that terrorism is Islamist, not Islamic.

Sections of our media cannot utter the words, let alone discuss the issue. On ABC's 7pm news on Friday, just as the identity of the terrorist became known, Steve Cannane in London made no mention that Khalid Masood had converted to Islam. The ABC's reported facts went no further than a "crazed man" with a rental car and two large knives. In the pursuit to protect minorities, we shy away from understanding the journey taken by men who grow up in a Western democracy only to become radicalised jihadists. Yet not having this conversation causes more division than having it.

Last year, Mark Lilla wrote a piece in *The New York Times* that stunned the left because its anti-illiberal agenda was exposed and, worse, in its favoured publication. Lilla wrote: "In recent years, American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing."

It's the same in Australia. Bill Shorten's Labor is wedded to the divisiveness of identity politics rather than seeking commonality among Australians. Rather than stand up for freedom of speech for all, Labor under Shorten wants more divisive legal redress in 18C. Rather than bringing 18C into line with community standards, Shorten prefers to widen the fault lines writ large by identity politics.

Australian Human Rights Commission president Gillian Triggs doesn't agree that Australians should engage in a plebiscite on same-sex marriage. Nor does she agree that community standards should be the test of section 18C. Her commitment to identity politics is complete.

Islamic State is engaged in a geopolitical, religious and ideological war with the West. Islamic terrorists are tightly united behind their aims. They have focus and unyielding solidarity on their side.

Military action and intelligence play a part in defeating terrorists, but they won't win the war for us. In the Senate last week, Attorney-General George Brandis reminded us that "Freedom is not a given ... A free society is not the usual experience of mankind." Freedom needs to be sought out, nurtured and defended. Yet in this ideological battle against terrorist organisations united in their beliefs, we are failing to project strength and solidarity by uniting around our core values.

To be sure, democracy by nature is diffuse. But even so, we have become so diffuse, too many reject commonality around the central values of democracy. Until western democracies unite more to defend basic freedoms that underpin our society, we are heading down a path of in-house destruction that terrorists will celebrate. We're doing their work for them

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